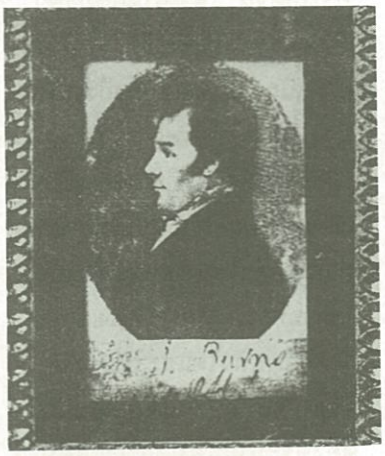
LANGUAGE FOR LIFE

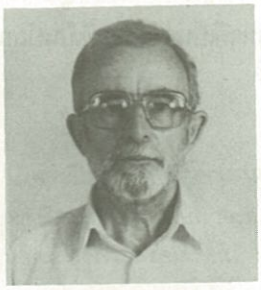
An introduction to the work of Scotland's national poet

ROBERT BURNS



Robert Burns : from the miniature by Reid.

When asked by a visitor to the Tchaikovsky museum near Moscow if it was true that the composer had been homosexual, the guide replied, *"Yes, but that's not the only reason why Russians love him."* And so with Burns. Certainly he was a bit of a lad, as we say. He had an eye for the lassies, which sometimes got him into trouble with the Kirk (Church), and the girls into trouble of another kind. He could take a drink, as we also say, and may on occasion even have got uproariously drunk, or roarin'fu', as he himself might have said. But the stories about him are exaggerated. In any case, like the Russians and Tchaikovsky, we Scots love Burns for other reasons also. Which I shall try to show.



Probably no other poet is remembered in quite the same way as Burns. On New Year's Eve, and at reunions and farewells nearly all over the world, it is Burns's song Auld Lang Syne that people sing, even if they know only the chorus and first verse, and would be hard pressed to explain the meaning.

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CHORUS

For auld lang syne, my dear,
For auld lang syne,
We'll tak a cup o' kindness yet,
For auld lang syne.

old long ago

Should auld acquaintance be forgot,
And never brought to mind?
Should auld acquaintance be forgot,
And auld lang syne?

We twa hae run about the braes
And pu'd the gowans fine;
But we've wander'd mony a weary foot
Sin auld lang syne.

hillsides
pulled; wild daisies
since

We twa hae paidl'd i' the burn
Frae mornin' sun till dine;
But seas between us braid hae roar'd
Sin auld lang syne.

waded; brook
noon
broad

Scotsmen all over the world have also their own special way of honouring their poet's memory. January 25 is Burns Night, when we remember his birth in 1759. His verses are recited and his songs sung. A haggis is addressed in Burns's own words before being eaten wi' tatties an' neeps (potatoes and turnip), and a great deal of whisky is drunk. Haggis? Sheep's heart, liver, lungs and kidneys, minced and mixed with oatmeal, seasoned with salt, pepper and onion, and boiled in the sheep's stomach. If the thought of ever having to eat such a concoction alarms you, don't worry - there's a vegetarian version. Here are the first and last verses of `To a Haggis.

Fair fa' your honest, sonsie face,
Great chieftain o' the puddin-race!
Aboon them a' ye tak your place,
Painch, tripe, or thairm:
Weel are ye wordy of a grace
As lang's my arm.

good luck to; jolly

above
paunch; small guts
well; worthy
long

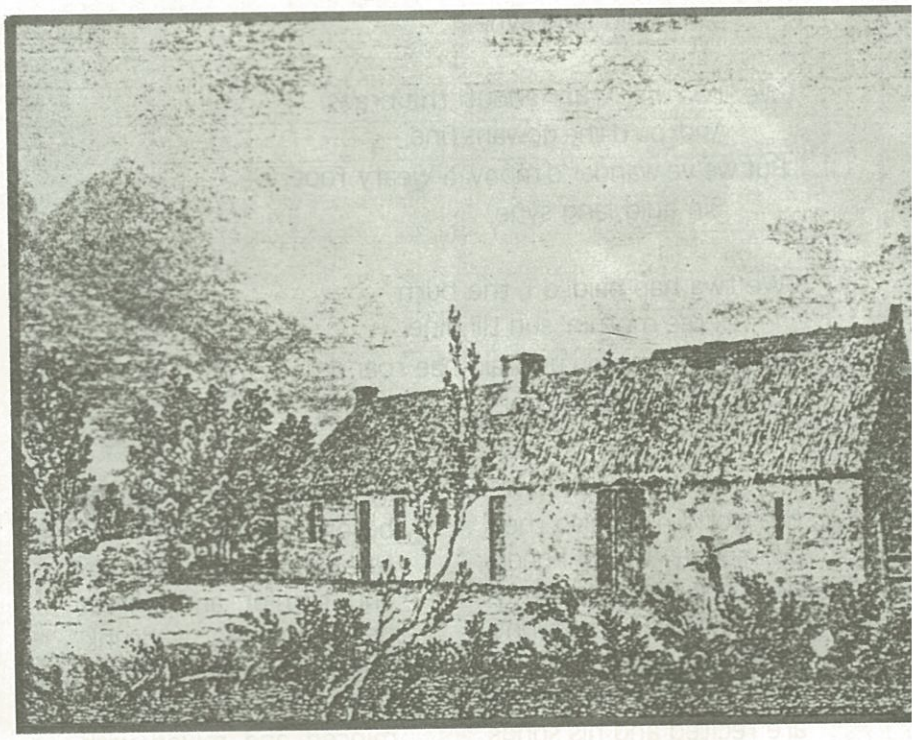
Ye Pow'rs, wha mak mankind your care,
And dish them out their bill o' fare,
Auld Scotland wants nae skinking ware
That jaups in luggies:
But if ye wish her gratefu' prayer,
Gie her a Haggis!

no watery stuff
splashes; bowl with handles
give

Burns himself liked to say that the seeds of poetry were sown by his mother's singing of the old Scots songs to him as a child and also by the many stories she told him of fairies, ghosts and devils. But two other influences were also important. With his father he studied the Old and New Testaments. He also attended classes at the home of a young teacher, John Murdoch, who gave him a thorough grounding in English and introduced him to the works of Shakespeare, Milton, Dryden and Pope. His Scottish literary heritage he was to discover later for himself. For the present, his visits to Murdoch were of necessity irregular and for very short periods, because even as a young boy he was taking on more and more responsibilities at home.

In 1766, his father embarked on the first of a series of farming ventures, all of which ended disastrously. Conditions were hard on these farms. At the age of thirteen, Robert, the eldest child, was doing the work of an adult, and at fifteen was the principal labourer on the farm. The work was too heavy and was to take its toll. It brought on heart disease, from which Burns was to die, aged only thirty seven.

An anonymous engraving of Burns's cottage dating from the frist decade of the nineteenth century: from *Burns's Cottage* by John MaBain (1904)



But back to the boy, aged fifteen. He fell in love for the first time with a young farmgirl working beside him at harvest time. Too shy to declare his love to her, he expressed his admiration for Nelly Kilpatrick in his first attempt at verse

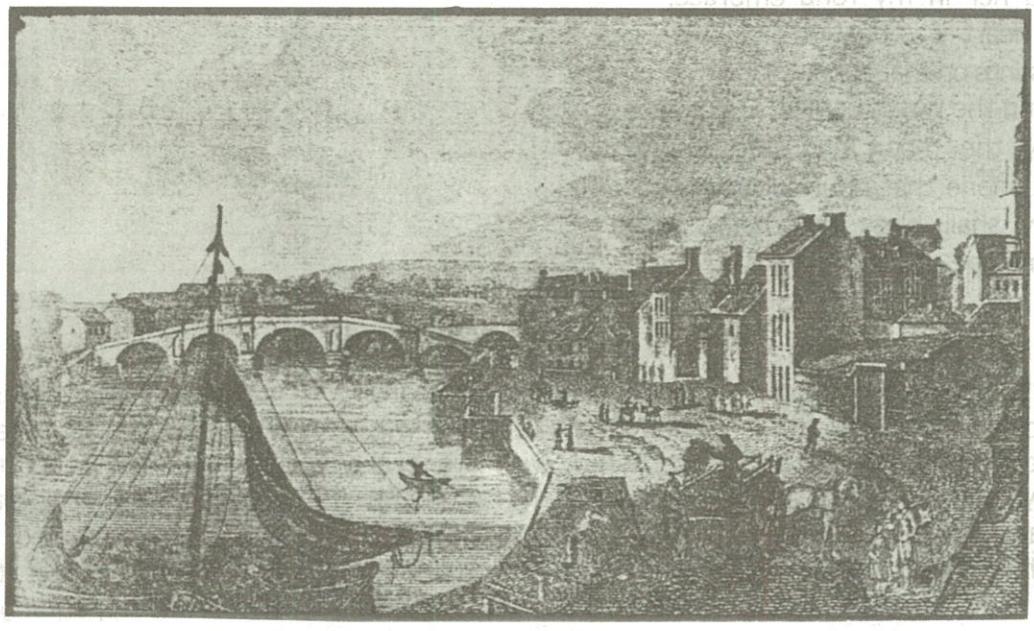
She dresses ay sae clean and neat, — always so
Bothe decent and genteel;
And then there's something in her gait
Gars ony dress look weel. — makes any

By eighteen he was capable of something better

When in my arms, wi'a' thy charms
I clasp my countless treasure, O!
I seek nae mair o' Heav'n to share — no more
Than sic a moment's pleasure, O! — such

But the gem of these early years is surely 'Mary Morison', so perfect indeed that some say it must have been written by a more mature Burns. Not so.

Yestreen, when to the trembling string — yesterday
The dance gaed thro' the lighted ha', — went; hall
To thee my fancy took its wing,
I sat, but neither heard nor saw;
Tho' this was fair, and that was braw, — fine
And yon the toast o' a' the town, — another
I sigh'd and said amang them a',
'Ye are na Mary Morison.' — not



Ayr in 1801, from *Scotia Depicta* by James Fittler and John Claude Nattes (1804)

Among other early poems are 'It was upon a Lammas Night' (1 August, harvest festival for the consecration of the new bread) - a joyous celebration of sexual passion

It was upon a Lammas night,
When corn rigs are bonie,
Beneath the moon's unclouded light,
I held awa to Annie:
The time flew by, wi' tentless heed,
Till 'tween the late and early;
Wi' sma' persuasion she agreed
To see me thro' the barley

The sky was blue, the wind was still,
The moon was shining clearly;
I set her down, wi' right good will,
Amang the rigs o' barley:
I ken't her heart was a' my ain;
I lov'd her most sincerely;
I kiss'd her owre and owre again,
Amang the rigs o' barley.

I lock'd her in my fond embrace;
Her heart was beating rarely:
My blessings on that happy place,
Amang the rigs o' barley!
But by the moon and stars so bright,
That shone that hour so clearly!
She ay shall bless that happy night,
Amang the rigs o' barley.

lovely
tight
unnoticed
little
knew; all my own
over

and 'The Death and Dying Words of Poor Mailie', a completely unsentimental yet sympathetic treatment of an animal. Robert's brother Gilbert has told the story behind the poem. Robert had recently bought a ewe, which was tethered with its two lambs near the farmhouse while the two brothers were ploughing some way off. A terrified young herdsboy called Hughie appeared on the scene with the story that the ewe had fallen into a ditch and been strangled on the tether. In fact the animal was only entangled

in the tether and had come to no harm. Burns found the entire incident hilarious, and on his way home after the ploughing composed the poem more or less as we have it today. It is only one of several poems that he addressed to animals or, as in this case, where the animal is made to speak. The dying ewe speaks her last words to the frightened boy. She hopes her "son an' heir" will not wander far from home but content himself with the local ewes. And for her "yowie, silly thing", she hopes she'll manage to stay free of the tether, and also not get into any bad company. There is a message for her master, too

"Tell him, if e'er again he keep	*own*
As muckle gear as buy a sheep,	*much money*
O, bid him never tie them mair,	*more*
Wi' wicked strings o' hemp or hair!	
But ca' them out to park or hill,	*drive*
An' let them wander at their will:	
So may his flock increase, an' grow	
To scores o' lambs, an' packs o' woo'!	*wool*
"And now, my bairns, wi' my last breath,	*children*
I lea'e my blessin' wi' you baith:	*leave; both*
An' when you think upo' your mither,	
Mind to be kind to ane anither."	*remember*
"Now, honest Hughoc, dinna fail,	*don't*
To tell my master a' my tale;	
An' bid him burn this cursed tether,	
An' for thy pains thou'se get my blether."	*you'll get; bladder*
This said, poor Mailie turn'd her head	
An' clos'd her een amang the dead!	*eyes*

The years 1784-86 mark an extraordinary flowering of Burns's poetic genius. There are more love poems, of course, as well as 'animal' poems, notably 'To a Mouse', which has the subtitle 'On Turning her up in her Nest, with the Plough, November 1785.' The poem moves unerringly from tender compassion for the mouse to a hint, in the last two verses, not only of the poet's own troubles, but also of the entire human predicament

But Mousie, thou art no thy lane, alone
In proving foresight may be vain:
The best-laid schemes o' mice an' men
Gang aft agley go often askew
An' lea'e us nought but grief an' pain, leave
For promis'd joy!

Still, thou art blest, compared wi' me
The present only toucheth thee:
But och! I backward cast my e'e, eye
On prospects drear
An' forward, tho' I canna see,
I guess an' fear

Tarbolton in the 1830's, showing a procession of St. James'Lodge : from the painting made by D.O. Hill for *Land of Burns* by 'Christopher North' (1841)

By his early twenties Burns had more than once earned the Kirk's disapproval, and not for his supposed sexual misdemeanours only. It did not like the obviously independent judgement he was already beginning to show in religious matters. And that in eighteenth century Calvinist Scotland! That there were good, sincere men, narrow in their outlook perhaps, among the elders of the Kirk, there can be no doubt. What angered Burns was the self-righteous hypocrisy of some of the ministers and elders, and these he pilloried mercilessly in his satires. The best of these, without a doubt, is 'Holy Willie's Prayer'.

'To a Louse, On seeing one on a lady's bonnet at church', ends

O wad some Power the giftie gie us
To see oursels as others see us!
It wad frae monie a blunder free us,
An' foolish notion:
What airs in dress an' gait wad lea'e us,
An' ev'n devotion!

would; gift; give

would from many

would leave
even

These lines convey the underlying theme of all the satires. They point up the chasm that often exists between our own opinion of ourselves and the perception of others.

A friend of Burns's, Gavin Hamilton, had been unjustly accused of immoral conduct by the Kirk. He refused to submit to its judgement, and was eventually acquitted of all charges. 'Holy Willie's Prayer' is the 'response' by one of the Kirk's elders to Hamilton's acquittal. Burns heaps scorn on him. and at the same time reveals the full moral horror of such a man's beliefs. Willie thanks God for having chosen him above all others *"a chosen sample, To show thy grace is great and ample."* The confession of his own lapses contains an unforgettable alliteration, which I will leave you to find for yourselves! For the rest, let Burns himself speak

I bless and praise thy matchless might,
When thousands thou hast left in night,
That I am here before thy sight,
For gifts an' grace
A burning and a shining light
To a' this place.

But yet, O Lord, confess I must:
At times I'm fash'd wi' fleshly lust;
An' sometimes, too, in warldly trust,
Vile self gets in;
But Thou remembers we are dust,
Defil'd wi' sin.

troubled
worldly

O Lord, yestreen, thou kens, wi' Meg	last night; knowest
Thy pardon I sincerely beg!	
O, may't ne'er be a living plague	may it never
To my dishonour!	
An' I'll ne'er lift a lawless leg	never
Again upon her.	
Besides, I farther maun avow -	must
Wi' Leezie's lass, three times I trow	girl; believe
But, Lord, that Friday I was fou	drunk
When I cam near her,	came
Or else, thou kens, thy servant true	thou knowest
Wad never steer her.	would; disturb
Lord, in thy day o' vengeance try him!	Hamilton's defence lawyer
Lord, visit him wha did employ him!	punish; Hamilton
And pass not in thy mercy by them,	
Nor hear their pray'r.	
But for thy people's sake destroy them,	
An' dinna spare!	don't
But, Lord, remember me and mine	
Wi' mercies temporal and divine,	
That I for grace an' gear may shine.	wealth
Excell'd by nane;	no one
And a' the glory shall be Thine!	
Amen, Amen!	

There were, of course, more liberal-minded ministers and elders in the Kirk, too. One was John M'Math. He asked for a copy of Holy Willie's Prayer, which Burns sent him. With it, he enclosed one of his earliest letters in verse, in which he makes it clear that he is not against religion, but only against those who use it to conceal their own shortcomings and hypocrisy

But I gae mad at their grimaces,	mad
Their sighin, cantin, graceprood faces,	whining, hypocritical; proud
Their three-mile prayers, an' hauf-mile graces,	half; prayer before a meal
Their raxin conscience,	elastic, accommodating
Whase greed, revenge, an' pride disgraces	whose
Waur nor their nonsense..	worse than

They take religion in their mouth;
They talk o' mercy, grace an' truth,
For what? to gie their malice skouth
On some poor wight,
An' hunt him down, o'er right an' ruth,
To ruin streight.

give; scope
creature, fellow
without right or pity
complete

Another letter in verse, 'Epistle to Davie, a Brother Poet,' is interesting not only for its very difficult old-Scots stanza form, but for its attack on injustice. He does not really envy the rich, but is angered by their pride

I tent less, and want less
Their roomy fire-side;
But hanker, and canker,
To see their cursed pride.

value

It's hardly in a body's pow'r.
To keep, at times, frae being sour,
To see how things are shar'd;
How best o' chiels are whyles in want,
While coofs on countless thousands rant,
An' ken na how to wair't
But Davie lad, ne'er fash your head,
Tho' we hae little gear;
We're fit to win our daily bread,
As lang's we're hale and fier:
*"Mair spier na, nor fear na",**
Auld age ne'er mind a feg;
The last o't, the warst o't
Is only but to beg.

from
shared
chaps, fellows; sometimes
dolts, fools; make merry
don't know how to spend it
never trouble
money

as long as; whole; hearty
don't ask for more or be afraid
fig; don't worry about old age
the last of it, the worst

There is no bitterness, for he acknowledges that happiness does not consist in possessions but is an inner quality, residing in the heart

It's no in titles nor in rank:
It's no in wealth like Lon'on Bank,
To purchase peace and rest.
It's no in makin muckle, mair;
It's no in books, it's no in lear,
To make us truly blest:

much, more
learning
blessed

* A quotation from Allan Ramsay's poem The Poet's Wish

If happiness hae not her seat
An' centre in the breast,
We may be wise, or rich. or great,
But never can be blest!
Nae treasures nor pleasures
Could make us happy lang;
The heart ay's the part ay
that makes us right or wrang.

long
always is

Irvine in the 1830's : from D.O.Hill's painting for *Land of Burns* by 'Christopher North' (1841)

This is not the place to attempt to detail Burns's love affairs or to tell the full story of his marriage to Jean Armour. But there are two related poems in particular which deserve to be known. In the first he welcomes his first child, a little girl born out of wedlock; in the second he celebrates his own prowess after Jean Armour gave birth to twins.

1

Welcome! My bonie, sweet, wee Dochter! — lovely; little daughter
Tho' ye come here a wee unsought for; — a little unexpected
An' tho your comin I hae fought for,
Baith Kirk and Queir; — both church and choir
Yet by my faith, ye're no unwrought for, — on my word; unwelcome
That I shall swear!

Sweet fruit o' monie a merry dint, — many; chance
My funny toil is no a' tint; — merry work is not all lost
Tho' ye come to the warld asklent, — world; askew, not quite right
Which fools may scoff at,
In my last plack your part's be in't, — small coin; share shall be
The better half o't. — half of it

Lord grant that thou may ay inherit — always
Thy Mither's looks an' graceful merit; — mother's; graceful
An' thy poor, worthless Daddie's spirit, — father's
Without his failins! — failings, faults
'Twad please me mair to see thee heir it — it would; more; inherit the father's spirit
Than stocked mailins! — well-stocked small farms

2 Chorus

Green grow the rashes O,
Green grow the rashes O,
The lasses they hae wimble bores, — girls; [untranslatable]
The widows they hae gashes O.

In sober hours I am a priest;
A hero when when I'm tipsey, O; — slightly drunk
But I'm a King and ev'ry thing,
When wi' a wanton Gipsey, O.

'Twas late yestreen I met wi' ane, — it was; last night; one
An' wow, but she was gentle, O!
Ae han' she pat roun' my cravat, — one hand; put round my tie
The tither to my p----, O. — the other;

I dought na speak - yet was na fley'd-
My heart play'd duntie, duntie, O
An' ceremony laid aside,
I fairly fun' her c-----, O.

couldn't; not afraid
was beating wildly

easily found

Kilmarnock in the 1830's : from D.O. Hill's painting for *Land of burns* by 'Christopher North' (1841)

Burns's last years were devoted to collecting, and re-creating the songs of Scotland. He refused to take any money for this work, and indeed was often so self-effacing that he simply sent off to the publishers what were in fact his own compositions, as songs he had discovered. 'Auld Lang Syne' is an example. *"But"*, as Dr Daiches says, *"we can recognise Burns's hand, by the way he manages to capture the moment of realised passion, the timeless emotion when the whole of experience is centred on what is happening here and now, with a lyrical intensity which is all the stronger because of the simplicity of the expression."* Dr Daiches also reminds us that the words were written to specific airs, and that without these airs they lose an important dimension. (I will try to get recordings form Scotland; failing that, I'll have to sing them to you myself !)

Three love songs, then. The first, a young man's promise of undying love. In the second, ardour and caution go hand in

hand. The third is the tender expession of the love of an old woman for her husband as they approach the end of their life together.

A RED, RED ROSE

O my luve's like a red, red rose,
That's newly sprung in June;
O my luve's like the melodie
That's sweetly play'd in tune.

As fair art thou, my bonie lass,
So deep in luve am I,
And I will luve thee still, my Dear,
Till a' the seas gang dry.

Till a' the seas gang dry, my Dear,
And the rocks melt wi' the sun:
will luve thee still, my Dear,
While the sands o' life shall run.

And fare thee weel, my only Luve,
And fare thee weel a while!
And I will come again, my Luve,
Tho' it were ten thousand mile!

O, WHISTLE AN' I' LL COME TO YE, MY LAD

Chorus

O, whistle an' I'll come to ye, my lad,
O, whistle an' I'll come to ye, my lad,
Tho' father an' mother an' a' should gae mad, go
O, whistle an' I'll come to ye, my lad

But warily tent when ye come to court me, watch
And come nae unless the back-yett be a-jee; not; gate; ajar
Syne up the back-style, and let naebody see, then
And come as ye were na comin to me, as though you weren't
And come as ye were na comin to me,

At kirk, or at market, whene'er ye meet me, — church; whenever
Gang by me as tho' that ye car'd na a flie; — go past; you cared nothing
But steal me a blink o' your bonie black e'e, — glance; lovely; eye
Yet look as ye were na lookin at me,
Yet look as ye were na lookin at me.

Ay vow and protest that ye care na for me, — always
And whyles ye may lightly my beauty a wee; — sometimes; slight; a little
But court na anither, tho' jokin ye be, — don't court another
For fear that she wyle your fancy frae me. — lure ; from

JOHN ANDERSON MY JO

John Anderson my jo, John, — dear
When we were first acquent, — acquainted
Your locks were like the raven, — hair; black
Your bonie brow was brent; — smooth
But now your brow is beld, John, — bald
Your locks are like the snaw, — snow (white)
But blessings on your frosty pow, — white head
John Anderson my jo.

John Anderson my jo, John,
We clamb the hill thegither, — climbed together
And monie a cantie day, John, — many; jolly
We've had wi' ane anither: — one another
Now we maun totter down, John, — must
And hand in hand we'll go,
And sleep thegither at the foot, — together
John anderson my jo.

Dumfries in the 1830's : from the painting by , D.O. Hill for *Land of Burns* by 'Christopher North' (1841)

I have left to the last something that Burns strangely called a mere 'bagatelle'. But 'For A' That' is no trifle. It is a ringing declaration of the dignity of Man. It embodies what was for Burns truly the disgrace of the artificial divisions of society. And it ends with the moving affirmation that one day men will recognise that, in spite of everything, they are indeed brothers.

Is there for honest poverty
That hings his head, an' a' that?
The coward slave, we pass him by,
We dare be poor for a' that!
For a' that, an' a that,
Our toils obscure, an' a' that,
The rank is but the guinea's stamp,
The man's the gowd for a' that.

[anybody]
hangs; and the like

in spite of everything

our work not recognised; all the rest of it of no real value
gold

What tho' on hamely fare we dine,
Wear hoddin grey an' a' that?
Gie fools their silks, and knaves their wine,
A man's a man for a' that.
For a' that, an' a' that,
Their tinsel show, an' a' that,
The honest man, tho' e'er sae poor,
Is king o' men for a' that.

simple food
coarse grey woollen colth
give; dishonest men

cheap, showy brilliance
though ever so

Ye see yon birkie ca'd a lord,
Wha struts, an' stares, an' a' that?
Tho' hundreds worship at his word,
He's but a cuif for a' that.
For a' that an' a' that,
His ribband, star, an' a' that,
The man o' independent mind.
He looks an' laughs at a' that.

fellow; called

dolt, fool

For a' that an' a' that,
Their dignities, an' a' that,
The pith o' sense an' pride o' worth
Are higher rank than a' that.

common sense; pride in oneself

Then let us pray that come it may
As come it will for a' that,
That Sense and Worth o'er a' the earth
Shall bear the gree an' a' that.
For a' that an' a' that,
It's comin yet for a' that,
That man to man the world o'er
Shall brothers be for a' that.

win; first place

I referred at the beginning to a certain notoriety that Burns has acquired, mostly unfounded in fact. He was certainly no ascetic, but it is worth pointing out that that negative reputation rests largely on the testimony of narrow-minded critics whose prejudices were as obnoxious in their own day as they are in ours. I shall leave the last word on this matter of Burns's character to a neighbour and friend: *"It is only on the gem we are disturbed to see the dust; the pebble may be soiled, and we do not regard it."*

But to the poems again. Two works that would have been treated more fully in a longer introduction can only be mentioned in passing here. One is the great narrative poem, 'Tam o' Shanter', and the other, with its moving portrayal of simple family life, 'The Cotter's Saturday Night' The selection that I have made will have shown, I hope, something of the rich variety of Burns's work. That variety of itself, however, does not explain 'The Immortal Memory' still celebrated in Scotland and indeed throughout the world. It is something else in the poems that especially enshrines that memory their truth, their honest emotion simply and sincerely expressed, and above all their sheer joy.

It was this quality of joy that worked its magic on at least one contemporary of Burns. Someone who had known great personal tragedy in her life professed to having been lifted out of the depths of despair by reading the poems. Hecht speaks here of *"the richest blessing which human power can dispense: the gift of comfort and healing to a sick heart"*. Eloquent testimony to the rich abundance of 'language for life' provided for us by Burns's poetry. □ ■

APPENDIX

Robert Burns lived all his life in the southwest corner of Scotland. A few dates will help to explain the illustrations, which have been reproduced from Maurice Lindsay's study.

1759 25 January Robert Burns born at Alloway, near Ayr
1777 The family moves to Lochlie, Tarbolton, a farm on the north bank of the Ayr
1781 Burns works as a flax-dresser in Irvine
1786 First collection of poems published in Kilmarnock
1793 Burns moves with his family to Dumfries
1796 21 July Burns dies at Dumfries

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